EARTH SUMMIT

SUSTAINING THE FUTURE
PRESS RELEASE

UN CONFERENCE ON SMALL ISLANDS TO PURSUE EARTH SUMMIT COMMITMENTS

NEW YORK, 25 August -- The hillsides of Haiti are barren and eroded from deforestation. On the Pacific island of Nauru, phosphate mining by foreign companies has left virtually no topsoil. Maldives, Kiribati and many Pacific atolls are threatened with extinction by rising sea levels.

Island "paradises" worldwide -- under increasing stress from overpopulation, poverty, toxic waste dumping, destructive fishing practices and a host of ills associated with modern economic development -- will soon have a chance to put their case before the world community.

At the United Nations, preparations are under way for the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, to be held in April 1994 in Barbados. The Committee charged with overseeing preliminary negotiations will meet from 30 August to 10 September at UN Headquarters.

The Global Conference was called for at the Earth Summit -- the UN Conference on Environment and Development -- held in Brazil in June 1992. Its goal is to put together a strategy for sustainable development specific to small islands, based on Agenda 21, the comprehensive global plan adopted at the Earth Summit. At the Summit, small islands were designated as an ecologically vulnerable group warranting special international attention.

The Barbados Conference will be a first test of the "global partnership" declared at the Earth Summit, by which rich and poor countries agreed to act together to pursue sustainable development -- that is, economic development that meets present needs without jeopardizing the welfare of future generations by undermining the natural ecosystems on which all life is based. While some problems of small islands are directly tied to their size and geographic isolation, many are closely linked to unsustainable development patterns worldwide.

Effects of Global Warming

One main concern of islands is the effect of projected global warming, primarily caused by carbon dioxide emissions in industrialized countries. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts a rise in sea levels of about 20 cm by the year 2030 if no measures are taken to curb emissions, with a 65 cm rise likely by the year 2100. Such a rise in sea levels threatens to submerge many low-lying islands, and would significantly damage coastal zones worldwide.

Tropical storms -- which already have a devastating impact on small island countries -- are expected to increase in frequency and intensity as global temperatures rise. Rising sea levels would also salinate the very limited supplies of fresh water available, and higher water temperatures would seriously impact the coral reef ecosystems on which many small islands depend for food.

The Association of Small Island States (AOSIS) and regional island organizations brought a voice of urgency to the debate on climate change leading up to the Earth Summit, where the UN Framework

Convention on Climate Change was opened for signature. The Convention is expected to enter into force some time in 1994 when legislatures in at least 50 countries have ratified it. Small islands continue to press for stricter emission limits to be added to the Convention as protocols.

Vulnerable Economies and Ecologies

But climate change is just one of a multitude of problems that combine to make small islands economically and ecologically vulnerable. Many islands have fragile economies dependent on the export of one or two commodities or on tourism -- both subject to external shocks and fluctuations in the world market. Natural disasters such as tropical storms can suddenly set back a country's development plans by years. Options for economic growth are often limited by geographic isolation, weak transportation and communication infrastructure and dependence on imported fossil fuels.

Rising population growth and consumption of the very finite natural resources of small islands threaten the delicate balance of ecosystems, resulting in widespread deforestation and shortage of fresh water. Waste disposal is problematic given the small land area available, and dumping of toxic and radioactive waste from industrialized countries is a major concern. Ecologically crucial coastal areas are being damaged by development, especially for tourism, and by sewage disposal. And lack of domestic management of stocks of fish and marine resources is often compounded by destructive overfishing by high-technology foreign fleets. These interconnected problems have a serious and immediate impact on the health and welfare of island peoples worldwide.

Proposed solutions to some of these island-specific problems might also have a positive global "ripple effect", especially recommendations to improve management of fisheries and coastal zones. In the Pacific, small island states are "custodians" of a total of 30 million sq. km. of ocean, or one sixth of the earth's surface. That is the sum of their exclusive economic zones -- the 200-mile offshore areas over which they have rights. Similarly, better monitoring of hurricanes and tropical storms would stand to benefit not only small islands which are most vulnerable.

Conference Preparations

As part of the preparations for the Global Conference, two regional technical meetings have been held -- one for the Indian and Pacific Oceans region, in Vanuatu in June 1993, and a second, for the Atlantic, Caribbean and Mediterranean regions, in Trinidad and Tobago in mid-July.
At these meetings, Governments -- with input from experts, non-governmental organizations and activist groups -- began the process of examining the current situation of small islands and putting forth proposals for promoting sustainable development.

Based on these regional recommendations, delegates at the New York preparatory meeting are expected to begin drafting an Agenda 21 for small islands. Ambassador Penelope Wensley of Australia will chair the session.

For more information contact:
Ms. Pragati Pascale
Information Officer for Sustainable Development
Department of Public Information
Room S-1037, United Nations, New York 10017, USA
Telephone: (212) 963-6870 or 963-7704, fax (212) 963-4556

Mr. Lelei Lelaulu
Dept. of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development
Tel.: (212) 963-7074, fax (212) 963-5935

DPI/1410